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IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SAFE SCHOOLS DECLARATION AND THE PROTECTION OF EDUCATION FROM ATTACK IN NORTH-EAST NIGERIA.

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IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SAFE SCHOOLS DECLARATION AND THE PROTECTION OF EDUCATION FROM ATTACK IN NORTH-EAST NIGERIA.

Authors:

[1]**Imran Kamilu Medela**
[2]**Michael Oluwafemi Samuel**

Affiliation:
[1]**Peace Building Zonal Office, Northeast,**
Institute for Peace and Conflict, Resolution,
Nasarawa State University Keffi, Nigeria.
[2]**Peace Building Zonal Office, Institute for Peace and Conflict, Resolution,**
Ibadan - Oyo State, Nigeria.

Contacts:

[1]imranmedela@gmail.com
07064647332
[2]femim3@yahoo.com
08032630911

Abstract

This paper examines the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD) and the protection of education from attack in North-East Nigeria, with a focus on Borno, Adamawa and Yobe States. Protracted Boko Haram insurgency and broader insecurity have produced large-scale school destruction, teacher killings, student abductions and prolonged closures, leaving millions of children disrupted or with no access to education. Against this backdrop, Nigeria's endorsement of the SSD and subsequent adoption of the National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools, the Minimum Standards for Safe Schools (MSSS) and the National Plan on Financing Safe Schools (2023–2026) are analysed as key steps in domesticating the global norm that schools must be protected spaces. Using a qualitative desktop research design, the study draws on document analysis of global reports by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, UNICEF publications, national policy instruments and recent MSSS monitoring data. Guided by norm diffusion theory, it traces how SSD commitments travel from international frameworks into national policy and, to a limited extent, into school-level practice. The findings show important progress in norm adoption and institutionalisation, including new coordination mechanisms such as the National Safe Schools Response Coordination Centre. However, MSSS monitoring reveals modest and uneven implementation: average state scores of about 41–42 per cent, only a small fraction of schools meeting most standards, and persistent attacks, abductions and closures in high-risk areas. The paper concludes that SSD implementation in North-East Nigeria reflects partial but incomplete internalisation of the protection norm and recommends stronger financing, security-sector reforms, community-based protection and improved data systems to close the gap between commitment and practice.

Keywords: Safe Schools Declaration; attacks on education; North-East Nigeria; school security; norm diffusion; Boko Haram; education in emergencies.

1.0 Background to the Study

Armed conflict and protracted insecurity in North-East Nigeria have had a profound impact on children's access to education. Since the escalation of the Boko Haram insurgency in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states, schools, teachers and students have been directly targeted through killings, abductions, arson and occupation of school facilities by armed actors. A 2017 assessment by UNICEF reported that about 57 per cent of all schools in Borno State were closed at the start of the 2017/2018 school year, leaving an estimated three million children in need of emergency education support across the region (UNICEF, 2017). Subsequent analyses indicate that since 2009, nearly 1,400 schools in the north-east have been destroyed, damaged or looted, with many unable to reopen because surrounding areas remain unsafe, and that more than 2,295 teachers have been killed and about 19,000 displaced (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack [GCPEA], 2020; National Security and Civil Defence Corps, 2023). High-profile incidents such as the abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in 2014 and subsequent mass kidnappings of students in Dapchi and other communities have come to symbolise the deliberate targeting of learners and the use of schools as arenas of violence (Human Rights Watch, 2018; UNICEF, 2018).

These attacks form part of a wider pattern of child abductions and school closures across conflict-affected parts of northern Nigeria. UNICEF estimated in 2018 that more than 1,000 children had been abducted by Boko Haram in north-east Nigeria since 2013 (UNICEF, 2018). More recent reporting documents waves of mass kidnappings by armed groups in north-west and north-central states, including the March 2024 abduction of 287 students in Kuriga, Kaduna State, underscoring that schools remain highly vulnerable even outside the original Boko Haram epicentre (Associated Press, 2025; UNICEF Nigeria, 2024).

In this context, the risk environment for education is characterised by complex, overlapping threats from insurgency, banditry and communal violence that undermine enrolment, attendance and retention, and that particularly affect girls' education (Human Rights Watch,

2018). The Safe Schools Declaration (SSD) provides a key normative framework for strengthening the protection of education in such environments.

Launched at the Oslo Conference on Safe Schools in May 2015, the SSD is an intergovernmental political commitment through which endorsing states pledge to protect students, teachers and schools during armed conflict, support the continuation of education, and implement the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict (Government of Norway, 2021; Safe Schools Declaration, 2025). The Declaration was initially endorsed by 37 states on 29 May 2015, with Nigeria among this first group of signatories (Government of Norway, 2021). Nigeria has since presented itself as a regional champion of the SSD, most notably by hosting the Fourth International Conference on the Safe Schools Declaration in Abuja from 25–27 October 2021 under the theme "Ensuring Safe Education for All: From Commitment to Practice" (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2021; Right to Education Initiative, 2021).

In line with its SSD commitments, Nigeria has adopted several national policies and planning instruments aimed at making schools safer. The National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools was issued by the Federal Ministry of Education in 2021, setting out a framework for risk reduction, crisis response and recovery measures in basic and secondary schools (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021). The same year, the Ministry, working with partners including UNICEF, developed Minimum Standards for Safe Schools as a practical tool for school-level safety assessment and preparedness across multiple result areas, including infrastructure, conflict risk and psychosocial support (Federal Ministry of Education & Education in Emergencies Working Group Nigeria, 2021; UNICEF Nigeria, 2024). To address financing gaps, the Federal Government approved a National Plan on Financing Safe Schools (2023–2026) with an estimated budget of about ₦144.8 billion, to be mobilised from federal, state and other sources for physical protection, early warning, community engagement and coordination, particularly in high-risk states (Federal Ministry of Finance, Budget and National Planning, 2023; Tribune Online, 2023).

Implementation structures have also begun to emerge, including the establishment of a Safe Schools Secretariat and the National Safe Schools Response Coordination Centre under the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (Federal Ministry of Finance, Budget and National Planning, 2023; National Security and Civil Defence Corps, 2023).

Yet evidence from monitoring exercises and field reporting points to a persistent gap between policy commitments and conditions on the ground in North-East Nigeria. UNICEF's Minimum Standards for Safe Schools (MSSS) Monitoring Report for 2024, which assessed 6,000 schools across ten states, found that only 37 per cent of schools had any form of early warning mechanism for threats such as attacks or abductions, and only 14 per cent had safe, accessible infrastructure that met the minimum standards (UNICEF Nigeria, 2024). While some conflict-affected states, including Borno and Yobe, showed relatively higher compliance due to intensive programming, many schools in the north-east still operate in environments marked by insecurity, periodic attacks and the use of school facilities as shelters or security posts, all of which undermine the protective function of education (GCPEA, 2020; UNICEF, 2017). At the same time, investigative and media reports suggest that thousands of schools in northern Nigeria have been temporarily closed in response to mass abductions and generalised insecurity, illustrating how threats to education are shaped by the interaction of insurgency, banditry and weak local protection capacities (21st Century Chronicle, 2021; Associated Press, 2025).

Against this backdrop, there is a clear need for a systematic examination of how Nigeria's commitments under the Safe Schools Declaration are being implemented in the specific context of North-East Nigeria, and how far these efforts have improved the protection of education from attack. Much of the existing literature focuses either on the scale and impact of attacks on education or on the design of national policies and plans, with less attention to how SSD principles and national instruments are translated into concrete practices in schools and communities in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe (GCPEA, 2020; UNICEF Nigeria, 2024). The purpose of this study is to analyse the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration as a framework for protecting education from attack in North-East Nigeria.

The broad objective is to assess how national SSD-related policies, minimum standards and financing commitments have been operationalised in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe States, and the extent to which these measures have contributed to reducing attacks on education, improving school safety and sustaining access to learning in conflict-affected communities.

2.0   Conceptual Review

2.1 Attacks on Education and the Global Protection Agenda

Research on attacks against education shows that Nigeria's experience in the North-East forms part of a wider global pattern in which schools, students and teachers are targeted in situations of armed conflict and insecurity. The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) defines attacks on education as threatened or actual use of force against students, educators, education personnel and facilities, as well as the military use of schools and universities (GCPEA, 2020, 2020b). The *Education under Attack 2020* report documents more than 11,000 reported attacks on education or military use of schools in 93 countries between 2015 and 2019, with nearly 23,000 students and education personnel harmed in these incidents (GCPEA, 2020b). In this global landscape, Nigeria is consistently highlighted as one of the countries most affected, due to the scale and severity of attacks by Boko Haram and other armed actors on schools in the Lake Chad region (GCPEA, 2020b; UNICEF, 2017).

The human impact of these attacks has been especially severe for women and girls. A Human Rights Watch investigation into attacks on education in north-east Nigeria documents how Boko Haram raids on schools, abductions and the occupation of school buildings have led to long-term trauma, reduced participation and a heightened fear of schooling among female students and teachers (Human Rights Watch, 2018). UNICEF likewise estimates that more than 1,000 children were abducted by Boko Haram between 2013 and 2018, and that conflict has deprived more than a million children in north-east Nigeria of schooling at various points (UNICEF, 2016, 2018). These findings place Nigeria within a broader pattern in which protracted conflict, displacement and recurring school attacks significantly increase the risk of long-term exclusion from education and deepen gender disparities in access.

2.2 The Safe Schools Declaration and Normative Developments

In response to these patterns, the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD) has emerged as a key political instrument for strengthening the protection of education in armed conflict. Launched at the First International Conference on Safe Schools in Oslo in May 2015, the Declaration outlines commitments for endorsing states to protect schools, restrict their military use and support continuity of education during conflict (GCPEA, 2020b; Safe Schools Declaration, 2015). Central to the SSD is the implementation of the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict*, which encourages armed forces and non-state armed groups to avoid using schools for bases, barracks, weapons storage or other military purposes (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2018; Safe Schools Declaration, 2015).

Global analysis treats the SSD as part of a broader trend of "soft law" norm-building in the protection of civilians. Article 36's policy briefing describes the Declaration as a tool for strengthening norms that aim to fully protect civilians from the humanitarian impacts of armed violence, focusing specifically on education (Minor, 2021). GCPEA and partner organisations emphasise its dual function as both a symbolic commitment and a practical framework that requires states to collect data on attacks, incorporate protection guidelines into military doctrine and training, and adopt measures to support the continuation of education during crises (GCPEA, 2020b, 2025).

Studies assessing implementation across regions highlight uneven progress. A regional review of the SSD in the Sahel, Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria finds that while endorsement has expanded and some states have set up steering committees to monitor implementation, gaps remain in domestic legal reform, security sector training and systematic reporting of attacks (World Vision, 2023). At the same time, global monitoring indicates that attacks and military use of schools have continued in many SSD-endorsing states, suggesting that political commitment alone does not automatically translate into effective protection (GCPEA, 2020b).

2.3 Safe Schools Initiatives and Implementation in Nigeria

Within Nigeria, the Safe Schools agenda has evolved in stages. The Safe Schools Initiative (SSI) was announced in 2014 following the abduction of schoolgirls from Chibok, as a multi-partner programme focused on securing schools in conflict-affected areas and relocating some students from high-risk communities (UNICEF, 2017; GCPEA, 2025).

Subsequent assessments point to important achievements, including the construction or rehabilitation of school infrastructure in selected areas, but also identify challenges such as limited coverage, sustainability concerns and uneven coordination across federal, state and community levels (GCPEA, 2025; Safe School Initiative Programme, 2025).

Nigeria's endorsement of the SSD in 2015 and its role as host of the Fourth International Conference on the Safe Schools Declaration in Abuja in 2021 marked a shift toward a more structured, national policy approach (GCPEA, 2021; Right to Education Initiative, 2021). The Federal Ministry of Education's *National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools* (2021) and the *Minimum Standards for Safe Schools* (2021) represent attempts to translate SSD commitments into domestic frameworks that can guide prevention, preparedness and response at the school level (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021; Federal Ministry of Education & Education in Emergencies Working Group Nigeria, 2021).

Recent documentation provides a more detailed picture of implementation. UNICEF Nigeria's Minimum Standards for Safe Schools (MSSS) Monitoring Report for 2024, based on assessments of thousands of schools in ten states, finds that while there has been progress on policy development and training, actual compliance with the standards is modest: only a minority of schools had early warning systems, safety committees or infrastructure that met minimum criteria, and significant regional disparities remained (UNICEF Nigeria, 2024). GCPEA's case study on implementing the SSD in Nigeria highlights positive steps, such as the adoption of a national financing plan and the creation of dedicated coordination structures, but also underlines ongoing challenges in ensuring adequate funding, integrating SSD principles into security operations and monitoring military use of schools (GCPEA, 2025).

Academic and policy analyses of safe school initiatives point to similar themes. Evaluations of the Safe School Initiative programme and related interventions identify lack of sustained funding, overlap of mandates, weak community ownership and limited awareness of minimum standards as recurring obstacles (Safe School Initiative Programme, 2025; World Vision, 2023). These studies suggest that while Nigeria has made significant progress in constructing a national policy and planning architecture around safe schools, the translation of norms into effective practice in high-risk areas such as Borno, Adamawa and Yobe remains incomplete and uneven.

2.4 Theoretical Framework: Norm Diffusion and the Protection of Education

This study is guided by norm diffusion theory, particularly the norm life-cycle model developed in constructivist international relations scholarship. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) argue that international norms typically evolve through three stages: norm emergence, where "norm entrepreneurs" promote new standards; norm cascade, where a critical mass of states adopts and socialises the norm; and norm internalisation, where the norm becomes taken for granted and routinely embedded in domestic institutions and practices. In this view, the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD) and the associated Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict can be understood as part of a broader global norm complex on civilian protection, children's rights and the security of education in conflict settings (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; GCPEA, 2020b).

Applied to Nigeria, norm diffusion theory directs attention to how a global protection norm travels from the international level (where the SSD was negotiated and launched) to the national level (where Nigeria endorsed the Declaration and adopted policies such as the National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools and the Minimum Standards for Safe Schools) and finally to the local level (schools and communities in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe). The theory suggests that endorsement of the SSD is an indicator that Nigeria has moved into at least the "cascade" stage with respect to the protection of education norm, but that internalisation requires deeper embedding of SSD principles into military doctrine,

education sector planning, budget allocations and everyday school practices (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021; Federal Ministry of Education & Education in Emergencies Working Group Nigeria, 2021; GCPEA, 2025).

The persistent gap between Nigeria's SSD commitments and the realities documented in the North-East—continued attacks on schools, low compliance with minimum safety standards and recurrent mass abductions—can be interpreted within this framework as evidence of partial or incomplete internalisation of the norm (UNICEF, 2017; UNICEF Nigeria, 2024).

Norm diffusion theory therefore helps to explain why the existence of formal commitments and national policies does not automatically translate into effective protection on the ground: domestic political will, institutional capacity, security sector incentives and local perceptions of risk all shape whether and how the protection of education norm becomes embedded in practice. Building on this, the analysis in later sections examines the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration in North-East Nigeria as a test case of how far the global norm of protecting education from attack has moved along the diffusion cycle from emergence and cascade toward genuine internalisation in conflict-affected contexts.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative desktop research design, relying on systematic document analysis rather than primary fieldwork. Document analysis is widely recognised as an appropriate strategy where there is already a substantial body of policy, legal, organisational and research material that can be analysed to answer clearly framed questions (Bowen, 2009). In line with norm diffusion theory (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), the study focused on how the global norm of protecting education from attack, as articulated in the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD), has been translated into Nigerian policy and practice, with particular attention to North-East Nigeria. Core sources included: global and thematic reports by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), especially Education under Attack 2020 and the Nigeria-focused SSD implementation case study (GCPEA, 2020, 2025); key UNICEF press releases and analytical reports on school closures, child abductions and

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safe schools; foundational national policy instruments such as the National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools and the Minimum Standards for Safe Schools (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021; Federal Ministry of Education & Education in Emergencies Working Group Nigeria, 2021); the National Plan on Financing Safe Schools (2023–2026) (Federal Ministry of Finance, Budget and National Planning, 2023); and recent monitoring outputs such as UNICEF Nigeria's Minimum Standards for Safe Schools (MSSS) Monitoring Report (UNICEF Nigeria, 2024).

Documents were identified through purposive searches of institutional websites (GCPEA, UNICEF, Federal Ministry of Education, Federal Ministry of Finance, Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps) and academic databases such as Google Scholar, using combinations of keywords including "Safe Schools Declaration Nigeria", "attacks on education north-east Nigeria", "minimum standards for safe schools Nigeria" and "safe schools financing plan 2023–2026". Inclusion criteria required that a document: (i) directly addressed attacks on education, school safety or child abductions in Nigeria since 2009; (ii) provided substantive analysis of Nigeria's endorsement or implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration; or (iii) specified national or sub-national policies, standards or financing arrangements relevant to safe schools in conflict-affected states. Following Bowen's (2009) guidance, the analysis proceeded through iterative reading, coding and categorisation of texts, paying attention to both explicit descriptions of policy measures and implicit assumptions about risk, responsibility and implementation.

Data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Nowell et al., 2017). Initial deductive codes were derived from norm diffusion theory (norm emergence, cascade, internalisation) and from the SSD's core commitments (protection of schools, restriction of military use, continuation of education, data collection). These were complemented by inductive codes that emerged from the material, such as "financing gaps," "security–education coordination," "regional disparities," and "community-level implementation." Themes were then organised around three analytic levels: global norms and guidance; national policy and financing frameworks; and school-level or state-level implementation in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe.

Triangulation across different source types, international reports, national policy documents, NGO case studies and media investigations, was used to enhance credibility and to identify convergences or contradictions in how Nigeria's safe schools agenda is described (Bowen, 2009; Nowell et al., 2017). As a desktop study, the research is limited by its reliance on existing representations and cannot capture first-hand perspectives of students, teachers or community members; the findings should therefore be understood as an analytically grounded synthesis of available evidence and as a basis for future field-based inquiry.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section synthesises evidence on how Nigeria has implemented the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD) in the North-East and how far these measures have protected education from attack, interpreted through a norm-diffusion lens in which global commitments are progressively internalised into national law, policy and practice (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

4.1. From endorsement to national frameworks: progress in norm adoption

Nigeria endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration on 8 March 2018, joining a growing group of states committing to protect education from attack and to implement the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict (UNICEF, 2022). This endorsement built on earlier concern about attacks on schools in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa, including the 2014 abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok and the broader pattern of school burnings, teacher killings and student abductions associated with Boko Haram and other armed groups (Human Rights Watch, 2016; GCPEA, 2020).

Following endorsement, Nigeria has taken substantive steps to translate SSD principles into domestic frameworks. The National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools and the Minimum Standards for Safe Schools (MSSS) were approved by the National Council on Education in 2021, providing a nationwide policy and technical framework for risk reduction, preparedness and response to attacks and other hazards in schools (Federal Ministry of Education [FME] & Education in Emergencies Working Group, 2021; UNICEF, 2022).

A Safe Schools Declaration Plan of Action (2021–2023) was developed to guide state-level domestication, and the National Plan on Financing Safe Schools 2023–2026 was subsequently launched, costed at approximately ₦144.8 billion over four years, with a focus on high-risk states including Borno, Adamawa and Yobe (UNICEF, 2022; GCPEA, 2025).

From a norm-diffusion perspective, these measures illustrate the "emergence" and "cascade" phases: international protection norms around safe education have been articulated, endorsed and embedded in official Nigerian policies and costed plans (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). However, the extent to which these commitments have been internalised in everyday practice in North-East schools is uneven, as the subsequent findings show.

4.2. Implementation on the ground: mixed progress in North-East schools

UNICEF-supported monitoring of MSSS implementation across 10 states in 2023 provides one of the clearest empirical windows into progress. A two-round survey of 5,993 schools in mid-2023 and 6,638 schools by the end of 2023 found an average MSSS implementation score of 41 per cent, rising only marginally to 42 per cent by year's end (UNICEF, 2024). Only nine of the 21 minimum standards were being consistently met, and just 17 per cent of assessed schools reached a threshold of at least 70 per cent of standards fulfilled.

Performance varied significantly across states. Borno, the epicentre of the insurgency, showed relatively higher compliance, meeting 15 of the 21 standards and posting the highest average score among the surveyed states, while states such as Kaduna and Sokoto met only five standards (UNICEF, 2024). This suggests that where conflict risks are most acute and where international and federal attention has been concentrated, SSD-related measures have gained more traction. Yet even in better-performing states, large numbers of schools still lack basic protective features, including secure perimeters, safe infrastructure and adequate water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities; only about one-third of schools across the sample sufficiently met students' nutritional and WASH needs (UNICEF, 2024).

For the North-East specifically, broader education-in-emergencies data underline the scale of

the protection challenge. UNICEF estimates that 2.8 million children in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa need education-in-emergencies support; at least 802 schools remain closed, 497 classrooms have been destroyed and another 1,392 are damaged but repairable (UNICEF Nigeria, 2024). Earlier analyses reported that Boko Haram's attacks on schools and the use of schools for military purposes by security forces had left nearly one million children in the region with little or no access to education (Human Rights Watch, 2016; GCPEA, 2020).

Taken together, these findings indicate that Nigeria has created a sophisticated policy and monitoring architecture for safe schools, and that some North-East states, notably Borno, have begun to align school practices with SSD-related standards. However, the overall level of implementation remains modest and highly uneven, and non-trivial numbers of schools in high-risk LGAs still operate without basic physical or procedural safeguards. This gap between policy commitments and practical implementation is a central theme in the literature on norm internalisation: the presence of formal rules does not automatically translate into behavioural change without sustained resources, capacity and incentives (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; UNICEF, 2024).

4.3. Security coordination and incident prevention: emerging infrastructures for protection

A further area of progress is the development of dedicated security coordination mechanisms around schools. In February 2023, the National Safe Schools Response Coordination Centre (NSSRCC) was inaugurated at the headquarters of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) in Abuja to serve as a national hub for threat analysis, coordination and rapid response related to school security. Media reports quoting the NSSRCC commander indicate that the centre helped to prevent 48 security threats against schools nationwide in its first eight months, with particular focus on the North and South-East (News Agency of Nigeria, 2023; Daily Trust, 2023).

Secondary analyses note that the NSCDC has also created a Safe School Special Response Squad as an armed rapid-response unit, and that the Nigeria Police established a Schools

Protection Squad in 2023 to further strengthen security around educational institutions (Odeyemi, 2023; Nkedishu, 2025). While these measures are national, they are particularly relevant for North-East schools that have previously been left without any formal security presence in remote communities.

From a norm-diffusion perspective, these developments suggest that SSD commitments are influencing the behaviour of security institutions by encouraging them to view schools as protected sites requiring specific doctrines, units and coordination mechanisms. However, the limited disclosure of operational details and the continuing incidence of attacks and closures indicate that these mechanisms are still consolidating and that their reach is uneven across rural and peri-urban areas in the North-East.

4.4. Persistent attacks, school closures and protection gaps

Despite these advances, attacks on education remain a serious concern. UNICEF's 2022 Safe Schools brief reported that in 2021 alone, at least 25 schools were attacked nationwide, 1,470 learners were abducted, and more than one million children were afraid to return to school; over 11,500 schools were closed between June and September 2021 due to attacks or the threat of attack, with the North-West and North-East most affected (UNICEF, 2022). GCPEA's Education under Attack country profile for Nigeria similarly highlights that between 2015 and 2019, attacks on schools and the military use of educational facilities persisted in the north-eastern states, with armed groups deliberately targeting schools and students as part of broader strategies of intimidation and control (GCPEA, 2020).

While recent mass abductions have been more prominent in the North-West and North-Central zones, the North-East continues to bear a heavy cumulative burden of destroyed or damaged school infrastructure, displacement of teachers and students, and ongoing insecurity on access roads to school (UNICEF Nigeria, 2024; The Cable, 2022). Studies focusing on girl-child education in the region underscore that parents' fears of abduction, sexual violence and recruitment by armed actors continue to undermine girls' participation and retention, despite policy commitments under the SSD (Adebayo & Mohammed, 2023).

These patterns highlight the limits of SSD implementation when underlying security conditions remain fragile and when accountability for attacks is weak. International and Nigerian commentators have stressed that armed groups' impunity, porous borders, poverty and governance deficits in conflict-affected LGAs all constrain the protective effect of technical school-safety measures alone (GCPEA, 2020; UNICEF, 2022).

4.5. Interpreting the mixed record through norm-diffusion theory

Viewed through the lens of international norm diffusion, Nigeria's engagement with the Safe Schools Declaration in the North-East shows a partial but incomplete internalisation of the norm that "schools and universities must be safe havens in conflict." The endorsement of the SSD, the development of a National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools, the adoption of MSSS and the creation of a National Plan on Financing Safe Schools indicate that the protective norm has clearly passed the "emergence" stage and has cascaded into formal policy and planning (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; FME & EiEWG, 2021; UNICEF, 2022).

However, MSSS monitoring results showing average implementation scores of 41–42 per cent, with only 17 per cent of schools meeting the 70 per cent threshold, and sustained school closures and abductions in high-risk areas, suggest that full internalisation has not yet been achieved (UNICEF, 2024). Key obstacles include limited financing and absorptive capacity at the state and LGA level, weak security-sector accountability, challenges in extending training and infrastructure to remote rural schools, and inadequate participation of communities, school-based management committees and learners themselves in the design and implementation of safety plans (UNICEF, 2022, 2024; GCPEA, 2025).

In this sense, the Nigerian case mirrors broader findings in the SSD literature: states that endorse the declaration and adopt related guidelines often face a second, more difficult phase of transforming legal and policy frameworks into context-appropriate, resourced practices that can withstand the pressures of protracted conflict and complex emergencies (GCPEA, 2020, 2025).

5.0   CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS

This desktop review shows that Nigeria has made important strides in implementing the Safe Schools Declaration and protecting education from attack in the North-East, but that serious gaps remain between normative commitments and operational reality. The endorsement of the SSD in 2018, the approval of the National Policy on Safety, Security and Violence-Free Schools and the Minimum Standards for Safe Schools in 2021, and the launch of a National Plan on Financing Safe Schools for 2023–2026 represent significant steps toward embedding global norms on safe education within Nigeria's legal and policy architecture (FME & EiEWG, 2021; UNICEF, 2022; GCPEA, 2025). Dedicated security mechanisms such as the National Safe Schools Response Coordination Centre further indicate that security institutions are beginning to internalise the special protection needs of schools (News Agency of Nigeria, 2023; Daily Trust, 2023).

At the same time, the persistence of widespread school closures, the continuing displacement of learners and teachers, and the modest average MSSS implementation score of 42 per cent underscore that large numbers of children in the North-East, particularly girls and displaced learners, remain inadequately protected from attack and threat (UNICEF, 2024; UNICEF Nigeria, 2024). The analysis suggests that Nigeria's SSD engagement has moved beyond symbolic endorsement but has yet to reach the level of deep behavioural internalisation envisioned in norm-diffusion theory, where protection of education is reflected consistently in security operations, resource allocation and school-level practice (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; GCPEA, 2020).

Based on these findings, several evidence-based recommendations emerge:

1. Consolidate and fully finance the National Plan on Financing Safe Schools 2023–2026, with a clear North-East focus. Federal and state governments should ensure that planned allocations for safe infrastructure, teacher training, psychosocial support and early-warning systems in conflict-affected LGAs are released and tracked transparently, with disaggregated reporting for Borno, Yobe and Adamawa.

2. Scale up MSSS implementation and monitoring in high-risk LGAs. Bi-annual MSSS monitoring, already piloted in ten states, should be institutionalised across all North-East LGAs, with targeted support to schools that score below the 70 per cent threshold, and with particular attention to safe infrastructure, conflict and everyday hazards, which currently show the lowest scores

3. Strengthen security-sector accountability and doctrine on protecting education. Training on SSD guidelines and child rights should be integrated into the doctrine and standard operating procedures of the armed forces, police and NSCDC, with clear prohibitions on military use of schools and strong accountability mechanisms for violations.

4. Deepen community-based protection and participation. School-based management committees and community volunteers have been identified as weak links, with only 67 per cent of SBMCs functioning effectively nationally; strengthening their role in risk assessment, school emergency preparedness and early warning in the North-East is essential to ensure that SSD implementation is locally owned and responsive to context-specific threats.

5. Improve data on attacks and learning outcomes. Continued investment in education management information systems (EMIS) and incident reporting, including disaggregated data on gender, displacement status and disability, is necessary to monitor trends in attacks and to assess whether SSD implementation is improving safety and educational continuity for conflict-affected children (UNESCO, 2023; UNICEF, 2024).

Overall, the evidence indicates that the Safe Schools Declaration has provided a useful normative and operational framework for protecting education in North-East Nigeria. The challenge now is to close the implementation gap by ensuring that the rights and safety of learners and teachers are consistently prioritised in security operations, budgeting and school-level practice across the region.

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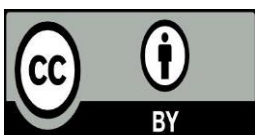
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